



# The New, Longer Road to Adulthood

## Schooling, Work, and Idleness among Rural Youth

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BUILDING KNOWLEDGE FOR FAMILIES  
AND COMMUNITIES

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*A Carsey Institute Report*

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# Introduction

In the not too distant past, most young adults in the United States were expected to complete their education, begin a career, and form a family—in that order—by age 25. Progress in each area was evidence of a full transition to adulthood. Since 1980, however, the timing and sequence of how emerging adults attain schooling, find a job, and begin a family have changed (Arnett 2004). Family and full-time employment are delayed as young adults invest more time in postsecondary education. In addition, young adults now often combine school and work and shift their focus between the two (Arnett 2004; Fitzpatrick and Turner 2007; Hamilton and Hamilton 2006). This shift has been attributed in large part to changing social and economic conditions in the United States that now require youth with middle-class aspirations or higher to spend more time gaining necessary education. This results in a longer transition to adulthood.

Changes in the transition to adulthood have prompted a rethinking of this period of life, which Jeffrey Jensen Arnett now refers to as “emerging adulthood” and which includes the years from age 18 to 24 (Arnett 2004). During this stage of life, young adults grapple with some of the most salient events influencing their futures. Decisions about education, work, and family formation made in early adulthood set youth on different paths that have lifetime implications for earnings and well-being.

Little is known, however, about the transition to adulthood among rural youth, their unique patterns of behavior, and how their education and work experiences can intersect with, or lead to, periods of idleness when they are neither working nor in school. Rural youths’ education and work experiences, their frequent migration from rural to more urban areas, and their idleness are critical issues facing many rural communities and the young adults who are poised to be the next generation of rural families.

No studies have examined whether the transition to adulthood has become longer and more complicated for rural youth, or if rural youth, more so than urban youth, are deterred in seeking higher education or professional careers by this lengthening process. Research has long identified the economic opportunities in rural communities as critical to youth development and their educational and occupational attainment (Huang et al. 1997). Shifts in the economy from manufacturing to services have led to a sharp decline in unionized, factory, and manufacturing jobs that pay a living wage to those

with a high school education (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Osterman 1999). Rural areas have been particularly affected as manufacturing jobs have moved overseas (Galston and Baehler 1995; Vias and Nelson 2006). Youth and adults displaced by this economic restructuring have frequently moved away from rural areas. Those remaining have less education (Johnson 2003), and this combined with fewer high-quality jobs in rural America dim employment prospects for those who remain.

This Carsey Institute report focuses on the education and work experiences of rural youth during the emerging adult years (age 20 to 24) as they make the transition from adolescence to adulthood. It documents how rural emerging adults combine work and school and experience idleness, closely examines their educational attainment, and compares their experiences with those in central city and suburban areas. We draw from current research and conduct analysis on nationally representative data sets that contain information on the transition to adulthood.

Specifically, we analyze U.S. Census of Population and Housing Public Use Microdata samples from 1980 to 2000, and the 2006 American Community Survey Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (iPUMS) (Ruggles et al. 2008) to examine how combining school and work has changed between 1980 and 2006 for rural and urban emerging adults. The 2006 ACS iPUMS provides insight into how characteristics of rural emerging adults (gender, race/ethnicity, family status) are associated with specific patterns of combining work and schooling. We then use panel data from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97) to examine work and school expectations during adolescence, and subsequent work and school outcomes for emerging adults who stay in nonmetro areas and for those who move away. These analyses illustrate the central role of migration during this life stage. Finally, we offer conclusions and policy suggestions.

# Education on the Ascendance

The demand for more education is evident in the growing share of emerging adults between 1980 and 2006 with at least some postsecondary education (see Figure 1). The share of those aged 20 to 24 with at least some postsecondary education rose from 29 percent in 1980 to 41 percent in 2006. The percentage with a bachelor's degree by age 24 also increased to 19 percent by 2006. At the same time, the percentage of high school graduates and those without a high school education decreased.

For today's emerging adults, the educational process has also changed, becoming longer and more complicated, particularly as more young people combine work and schooling (Hamilton and Hamilton 2006; Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck, and Park 2005). To better understand the school and work experiences of emerging adults, we track four possible work and school combinations in Table 1: (1) only enrolled in school, (2) only in the labor force, (3) combining school and work, and (4) idleness (neither in school nor working).

The most notable changes between 1980 and 2006 are the decline in young adults who are only working—from 61 per-

cent to 44 percent—and the steady increase in the percentage who combine school and work—from 13 percent to 30 percent. (See Figure 2 and top panel of Table 1.) “Any” school engagement (either alone or in combination with work) rose from 23 percent in 1980 to 48 percent in 2006, whereas any work engagement (alone or in combination with school) remained unchanged at about 75 percent. In other words, many emerging adults have always worked, but now more are also combining school as they pursue the needed credentials for a successful transition to adulthood. These two trends might be related to similar causal factors. In recent decades, the soaring cost of tuition and the declining value of government financial aid programs, coupled with the increasing demand for a college education in the labor market, have put considerable financial strain on many youth and young adults with college aspirations (Draut 2005), resulting in both a decline in those exclusively engaged in schooling and an increase in those combining school and work (Fitzpatrick and Turner 2007). The percentage exclusively in school and the percentage idle fluctuated during this time period.

FIGURE 1. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF ALL YOUTH AGED 20 TO 24, 1980 TO 2006

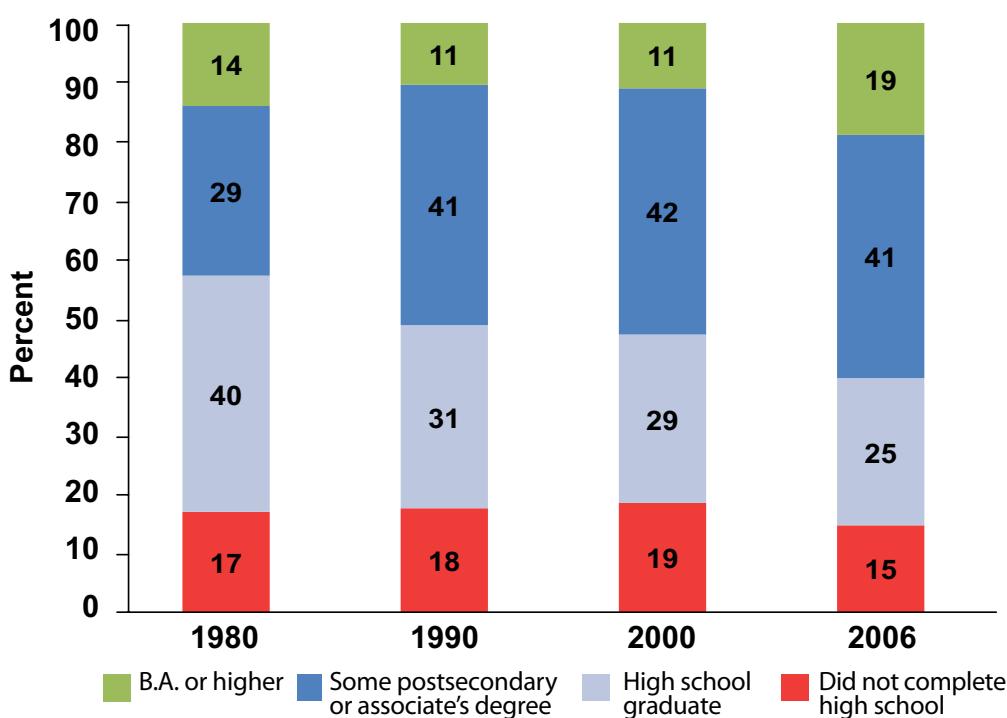


TABLE 1. SCHOOL, WORK, AND IDLENESS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS AGED 20 TO 24: 1980, 1990, 2000, AND 2006

	1980*	1990**	2000***	2006‡
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
<b>Idleness and Engagement Overall</b>				
School only	10	12	12	18
Work only	61	55	51	44
School and work	13	22	24	30
Idle	15	11	14	8
<b>Nonmetro</b>				
	(19)##	(20)	(16)	(13)
School only	10	13	11	7
Work only	62	56	53	47
School and work	10	17	20	36
Idle	19	14	16	10
<b>Central City Metro</b>				
	(22)	(22)	(20)	(29)
School only	11	13	13	19
Work only	57	50	47	45
School and work	17	23	25	29
Idle	15	14	15	7
<b>Suburban Metro</b>				
	(48)	(56)	(58)	(35)
School only	9	12	11	22
Work only	63	56	52	42
School and work	13	23	25	31
Idle	14	10	12	5

**Note:** All percentages are weighted using a standardized person weight.

\* Source: 1980 1 in 1000 Public Use Microdata Sample of the U.S. Census of Population and Housing. Total sample size for those aged 20 to 24 is 20,373: 3,776 in nonmetro areas; 4,554 in central city areas; 9,844 in suburban areas; and 2,199 in not identified areas. Education completed is reported differently in the 1980 PUMS data than in the 1990 and 2000 PUMS or 2006 ACS PUMS. In 1980, education completed past high school was only identified by years in college as "first year, second year, . . . eighth year or more." There is no indicator that a college degree has been completed. For this analysis, those who completed a fourth year of college or more are included in the "Four Years of College Completed or More" category. There is no indication of completion of associate's degrees or vocational training. Those in the "Some College Completed" category finished a first through third year of college.

\*\* Source: 1990 1% Public Use Microdata Sample. Total sample size for population aged 20 to 24 is 172,216: 41,354 in nonmetro areas; 33,137 in central city areas; 93,077 in suburban areas; and 4,648 in not identified areas.

\*\*\* Source: 2000 5% Public Use Microdata Sample. Total sample size for those aged 20 to 24 is 882,413: 66,072 in nonmetro areas; 154,172 in central city areas; 489,637 in suburban areas; and 172,532 in not identified areas.

‡ Source: 2006 American Community Survey iPUMS files from the University of Minnesota Population Center. Total sample size for those aged 20 to 24 is 180,777: 27,098 in nonmetro areas, 49,217 in central city metro areas, 59,641 in suburban metro areas, 37,346 in mixed metro areas, and 7,475 in not identified areas. One important difference between the 2006 ACS iPUMS and the 1980-2000 decennial census PUMS files is that the 2006 ACS file includes a sample of about 2.5 percent of the national group quarter population.

## Numbers in parentheses indicate the percentage of the sample. For example, in 1980, 19 percent of the sample was nonmetropolitan.

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE OF ALL YOUTH AGED 20 TO 24 COMBINING SCHOOL AND WORK, 1980 TO 2006

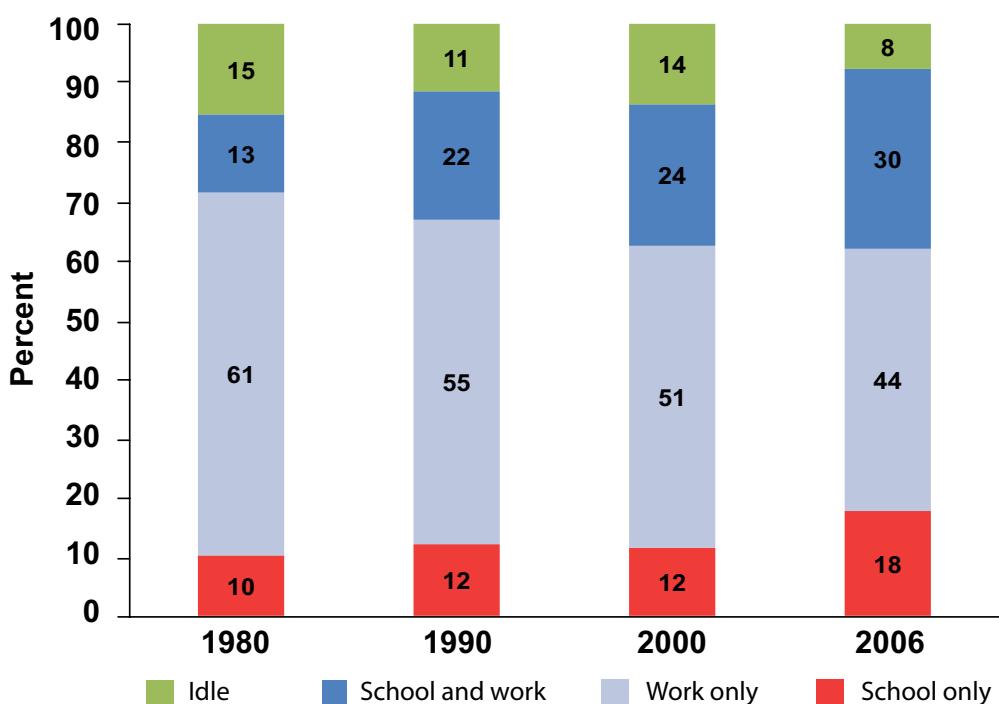


FIGURE 3. PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH AGED 20 TO 24 IN SCHOOL ONLY, 1980 TO 2006

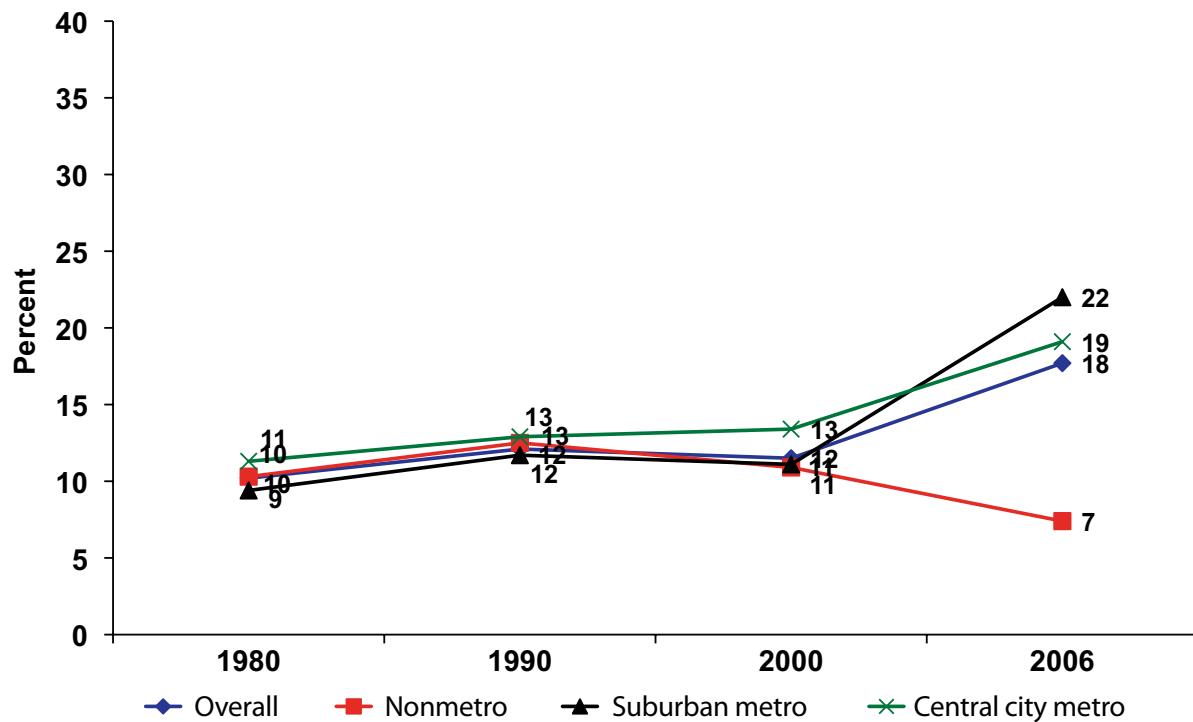
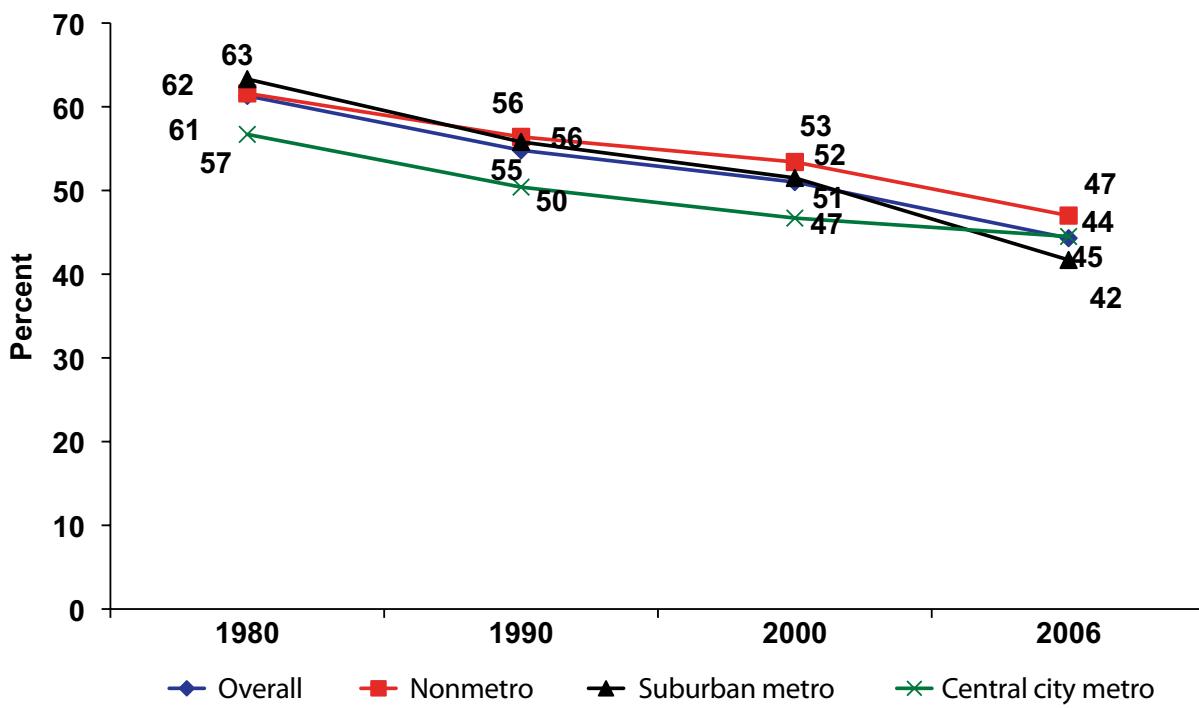


FIGURE 4. PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH AGED 20 TO 24 WORKING ONLY, 1980 TO 2006



With a few notable exceptions, nonmetro, metro central city, and suburban emerging adults have experienced the same trends in patterns of schooling and work, although their levels are often unique. Figures 3 to 6 compare work and schooling for rural and urban youth in 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2006. Table 1 provides the data for these figures. From 1980 to 2000, exclusive school enrollment changed little in both nonmetro and metro areas (as shown in Figure 3). However, beginning in the 2000s, a noticeably smaller percentage of nonmetro youth were exclusively in school compared to youth in other areas. Overall, 18 percent of emerging adults were exclusively engaged in school in 2006, compared to only 7 percent of those in nonmetro areas.

In contrast, nonmetro emerging adults are more strongly attached to the labor force than others, even as working exclusively has declined for all youth over time (see Figure 4). By 2000, 53 percent of nonmetro emerging adults were only in the

labor force, compared with 51 percent overall. This difference persisted in 2006, when 47 percent of nonmetro youth were only in the labor force while 44 percent of youth overall were only working.

Labor force participation can also be combined with schooling, which is a pattern that more young adults have followed in recent decades, although historically nonmetro young adults have had lower levels of combining work and schooling. For example, Figure 5 describes how between 1980 and 2006, more young adults from all residence areas were combining work and schooling. Within residence areas, the percentage combining school and work grew from 17 to 29 percent and 13 to 31 percent for those in central city and suburban areas, respectively. For nonmetro young adults, the percentage combining school and work rose from 10 percent in 1980 to 36 percent in 2006, although much of that increase occurred between 2000 and 2006.

FIGURE 5. PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH AGED 20 TO 24 COMBINING SCHOOL AND WORK, 1980 TO 2006

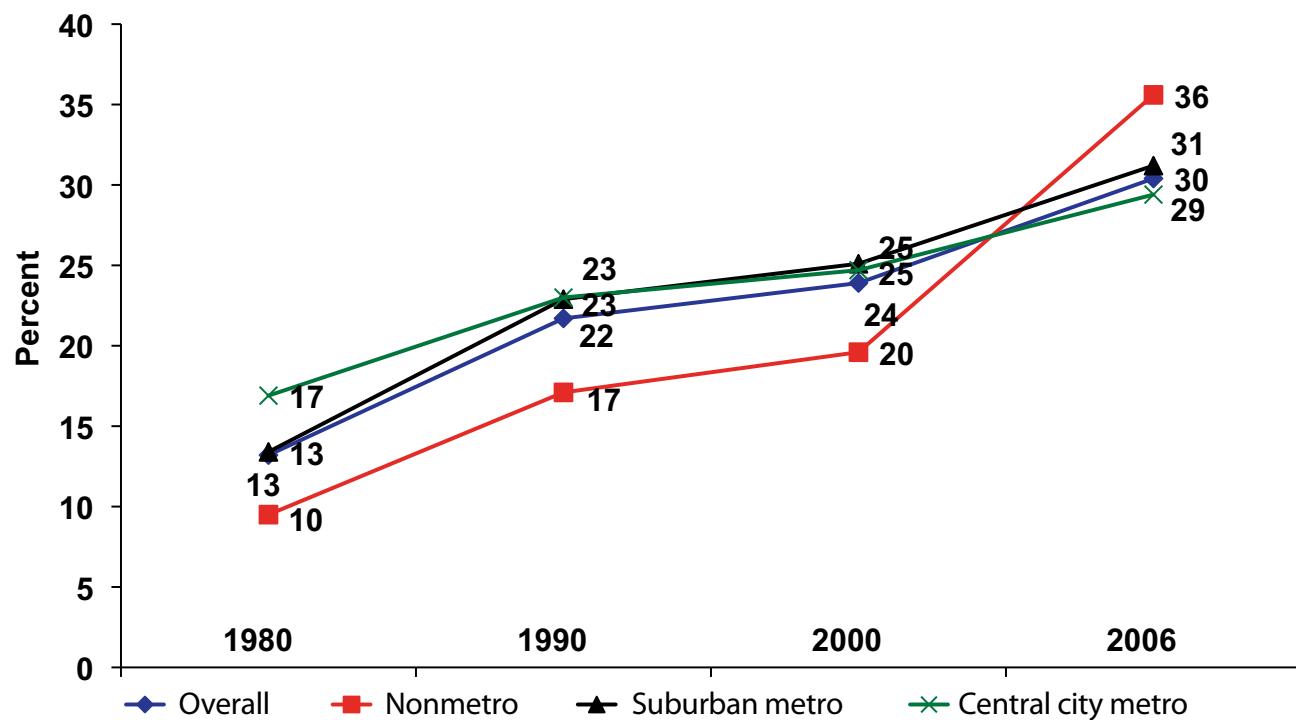
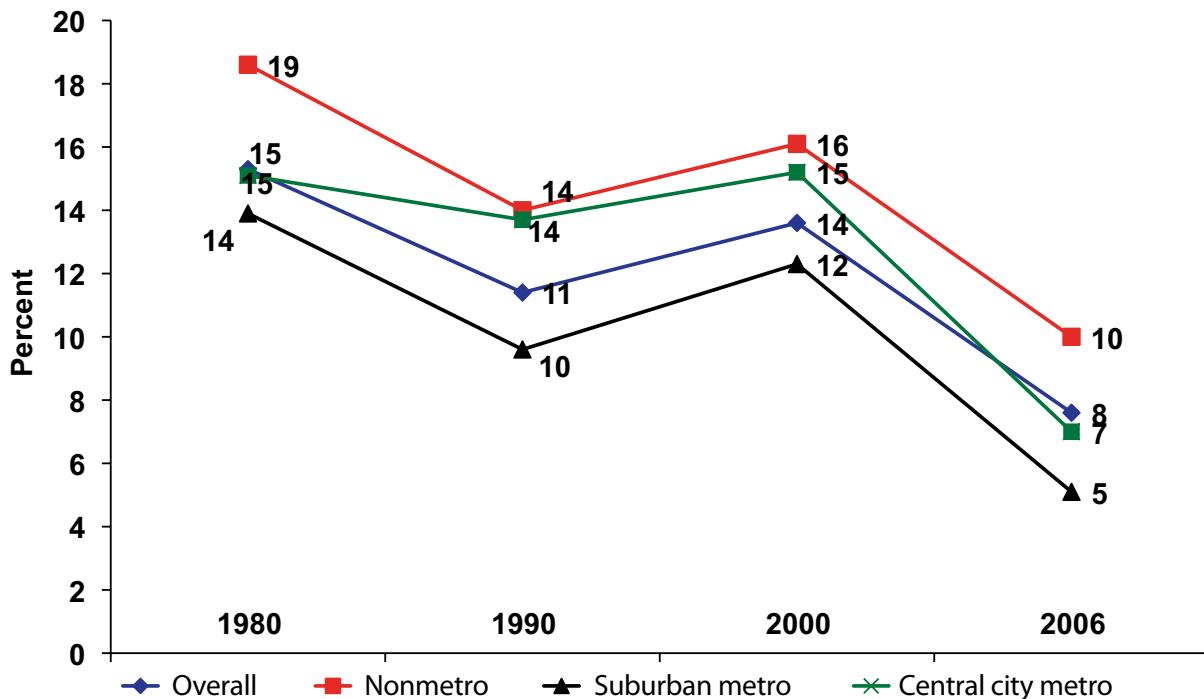


FIGURE 6. PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH AGED 20 TO 24 IDLE, 1980 TO 2006



Idleness also varies over time, which likely reflects broader economic conditions and lack of job opportunities for young adults in rural areas (see Figure 6), and historically, a higher percentage of nonmetro youth have been idle, particularly during periods of economic crisis such as 1980. In that year, nearly 19 percent of nonmetro young adults were idle. After declining for a decade or more, idleness for nonmetro youth had again increased by 2000. In that year, 16 percent of nonmetro youth were idle compared with 15 percent for central city and 12 percent for suburban youth. These shares declined to their lowest levels in all residence areas by 2006.

# Emerging Inequality for Men and Women, Racial/Ethnic Groups, and Early Parents

Individual characteristics such as race, gender, and socio-economic status are important factors that contribute to inequality in the transition to adulthood and future status attainment of young adults (Shanahan 2000). Early family formation—marrying or cohabiting and having children—can contribute to different patterns and outcomes (Furstenberg et al. 1999). Tables 2 and 3 show how these factors relate to schooling, work, and idleness using data from the 2006 ACS iPUMS.

Table 2 shows the current work and education picture by residence for young adults aged 20 to 24. Nonmetro young adults are distinct in that notably fewer have a bachelor's education—4 percent—compared to 26 and 24 percent from suburban and central city areas, respectively. At the same time, however, a much larger share of nonmetro young adults have an associate's degree (21 percent) compared to those from other areas. In addition, fewer nonmetro young adults are enrolled in school—43 percent, compared with 53 percent in suburban areas and 49 percent in central city areas.

In contrast, labor force participation is higher for nonmetro young adults. In 2006, 83 percent of nonmetro young adults were in the labor force, compared to 75 percent overall. Wage differences by education are one of the main factors contributing to wage inequality in recent decades (Morris and Western 1999), and the lower educational attainment and school enrollment of today's nonmetro young people suggest that metro/nonmetro earnings differences will persist.

TABLE 2. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND WORK STATUS AMONG YOUTH AGED 20 TO 24: 2006 ACS iPUMS

	All	Nonmetro	Suburban	Central City
			Metro	Metro
<b>Educational Attainment</b>				
Less than high school	15	11	8	25
High school graduate	25	27	27	17
Some postsecondary, no degree	34	36	32	30
Associate's degree	8	21	7	4
Bachelor's degree or higher	19	4	26	24
<b>Currently enrolled in school</b>	48	43	53	49
<b>In the labor force</b>	75	83	73	74

Table 3 focuses on nonmetro young adults. Lower educational attainment of nonmetro emerging adults is also a problem, because idleness is higher for those with less education (see Table 3). As one might expect, idleness is highest (36 percent) among high school dropouts. Yet even among high school graduates, nearly one in five is idle. Those with an associate's or bachelor's degrees do better, with 9 percent idle. For some, idleness may reflect the transition between schooling and work or between jobs. For others, it may indicate withdrawal from the labor market because of limited job prospects or other life problems unrelated to the labor market (Osgood et al. 2005).

## Race and Ethnicity

Given documented patterns of economic disadvantage among adult rural minority groups (Jensen, McLaughlin, and Slack 2003; Snyder, McLaughlin, and Findeis 2006), it is not surprising that we find similar struggles among minority youth as they attempt to achieve the traditional milestones of adulthood (see Table 3). For example, a smaller share of non-Hispanic white young adults (8 percent) is idle compared to non-Hispanic black (32 percent) and Hispanic (22 percent) young adults, although a smaller share of those from the "Other" racial category is idle (6 percent). Nearly 60 percent of Hispanic emerging adults in nonmetro areas are exclusively working, and noticeably fewer are either solely in school (8 percent) or combining work and schooling (11 percent). In contrast, a larger share of non-Hispanic blacks is only in school (15 percent), but a smaller share is working (46 percent). Nonmetro young adults from the Other racial group have a distinct pattern, in which most (79 percent) are combining school and work, fewer are only working (12 percent), a small share is idle (6 percent), and very few (4 percent) are only in school.

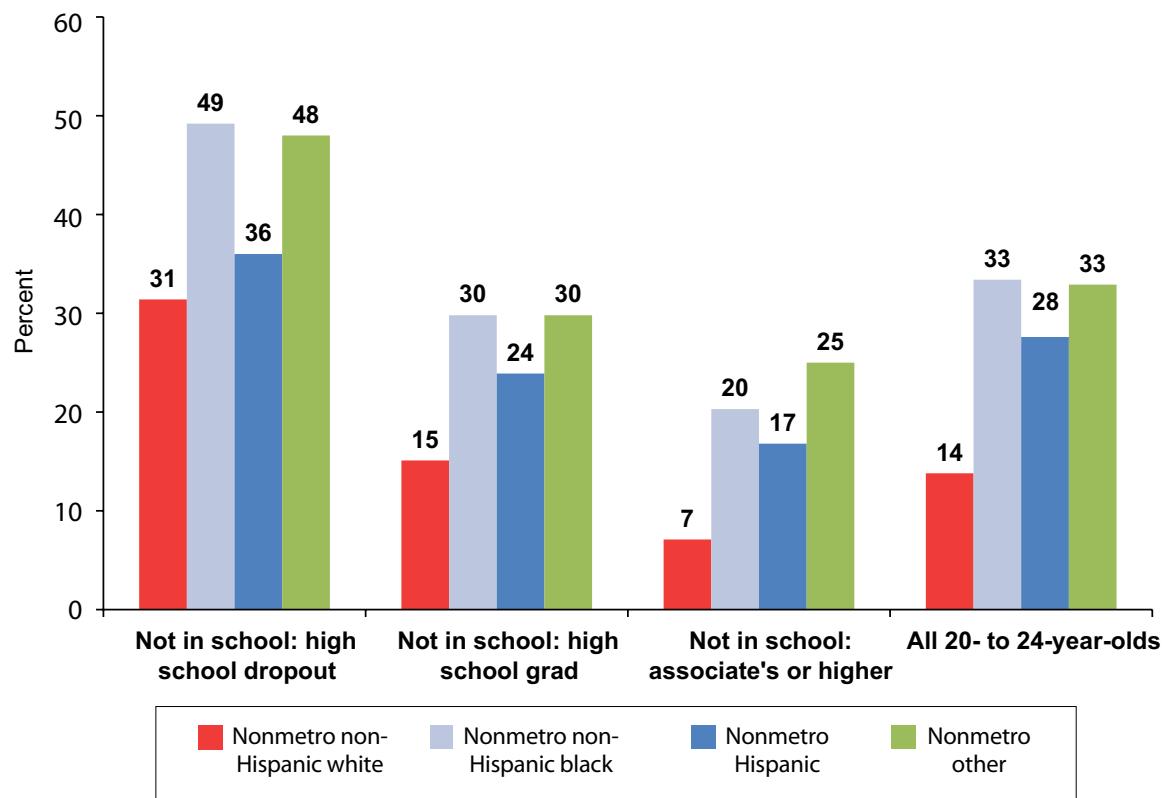
Two patterns stand out when comparing racial/ethnic differences in idleness among young adults not in school (see Figure 7). First, idleness declines with education for all racial and ethnic groups. Second, for those with less than a high school education, idleness is much higher for non-Hispanic blacks and Others compared to everyone else in nonmetro areas. Nearly one-half of nonmetro non-Hispanic black and Other high school dropouts were idle in 2006 compared with 31 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 36 percent of Hispanics. For high school graduates and those with an associate's or higher degree, non-Hispanic blacks also have the highest levels of idle-

TABLE 3. PERCENTAGE OF NONMETROPOLITAN ADOLESCENTS AGED 20 TO 24 IDLE BY INDICATED CHARACTERISTICS (ACS iPUMS 2006)

	ALL 20- TO 24-YEAR-OLDS				IDLENESS AMONG 20- TO 24-YEAR-OLDS NOT ENROLLED IN SCHOOL		
	Enrolled in school only (%)	In labor force and in school (%)	In labor force only (%)	Idle (%)	High school dropout (%)	High school graduate (%)	Some postsecondary/A.A./B.A. degree (%)
All Sex	7	36	47	10	36	18	9
Male	7	35	50	8	34	15	4
Female	8	36	43	12	40	22	15
Race/Ethnicity							
non-Hispanic white	7	32	53	8	31	15	7
non-Hispanic black	15	16	46	32	49	30	20
Hispanic	8	11	58	22	36	24	17
Other	4	79	12	6	48	30	25
Union Status							
Married	5	12	65	19	32	23	17
Cohabiting	3	15	69	14	20	15	15
Single	8	41	43	8	39	17	6
Parental Status							
No children	8	40	44	8	37	16	16
At least one child	5	9	65	21	32	25	25

*Note:* All percentages are weighted using the ACS iPUMS person weight. Total sample size for those aged 20 to 24 in nonmetro areas is 27,098: 10.2 percent are high school dropouts, 24.8 percent are high school graduates, 19.4 percent have some postsecondary education or have completed their associate's degrees, and 2.6 percent have bachelor's degrees. The remaining 43.0 percent are enrolled in school.

FIGURE 7. PERCENTAGE OF NONMETRO YOUTH AGED 20 TO 24 NOT ENROLLED IN SCHOOL WHO ARE IDLE BY RACE/ETHNICITY



ness, along with Others. One-third of non-Hispanic blacks and Others with postsecondary education are also idle, as shown in Figure 7. One possible explanation is that higher educational attainment does not eliminate the discrimination against racial and ethnic minority groups in rural labor markets.

## Gender

We also find clear gender differences in patterns of work and school participation among rural youth. About equal shares of females and males in nonmetro areas are combining work and schooling. In contrast, a higher share of males—one-half—is exclusively in the labor force, compared to 43 percent of females. Idleness is 50 percent higher among nonmetro females compared to males at this point in their lives—12 percent of females compared with 8 percent of males (see Table 3). These gender differences persist when examining those not enrolled in school. Forty percent of women with less than a high school diploma are idle, while 22 percent of women high school graduates are idle. Even among nonmetro young adults with some postsecondary education, nearly four times as many women as men are idle (15 compared to 4 percent). These differences, particularly the share idle, may stem from the impact of early childbearing on other outcomes, a possibility explored next.

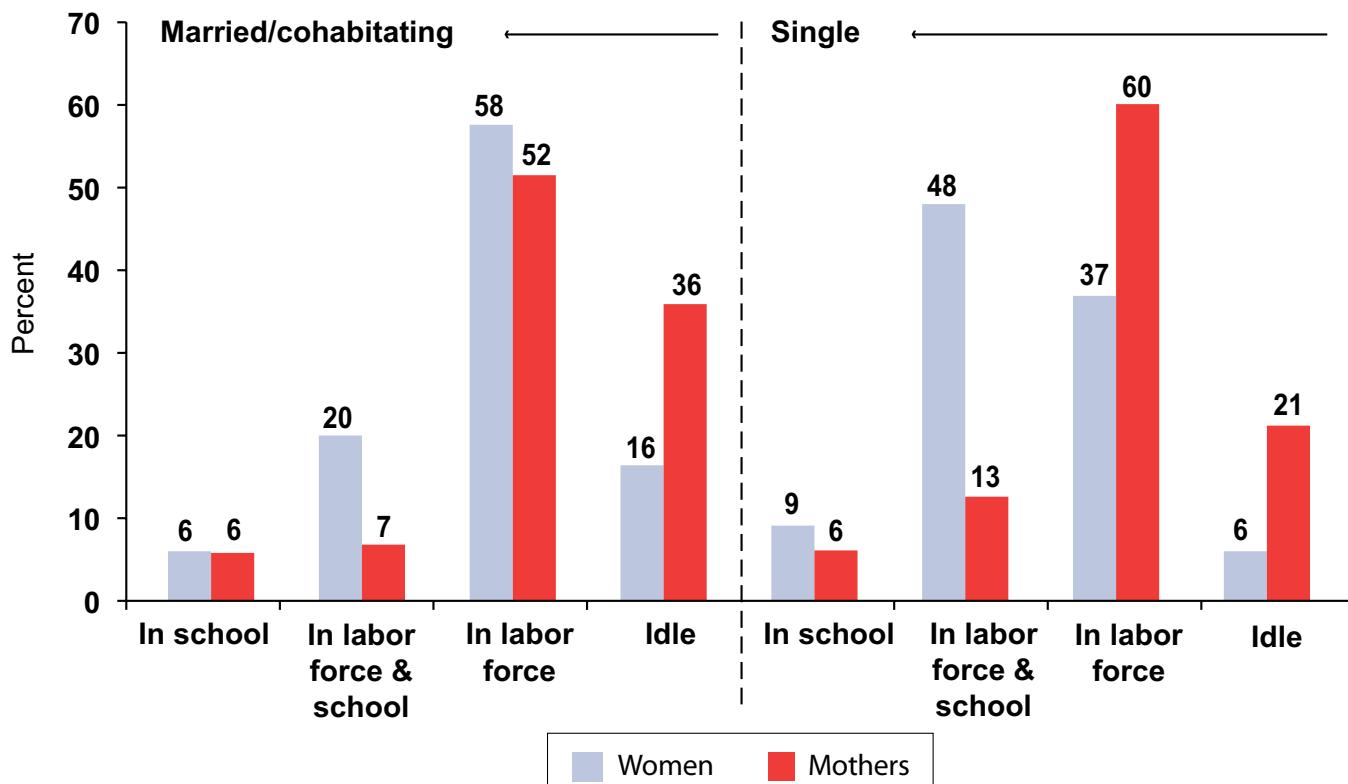
## Early Family Formation

Early childbearing often derails future school and career plans (Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck, and Park 2005). Today's young adults are generally postponing family as they invest more time in building their human capital. Young women, in particular, have delayed family to complete schooling that will prepare them for future employment (Fussell and Furstenberg 2005). Despite growing numbers of women working in nonmetro areas (Smith 2009), many young women still devote their energies solely to caring for home and family. Nonmetro women in particular persist in a pattern of earlier family formation (McLaughlin, Lichter, and Johnson 1993; Snyder, Brown, and Condo 2004), which may place them at a disadvantage in completing schooling and gaining work experience.

Education and work outcomes differ by marital status (see Table 3). Married and cohabiting emerging adults in nonmetro areas are more often working and far less engaged in education than their single counterparts. Moreover, 19 percent of those who were married were idle compared with 14 percent of cohabitators and 8 percent of singles.

These marital status differences are linked to the presence of children. Having at least one child is associated with less school enrollment (5 percent versus 8 percent with no children), more working (65 percent versus 44 percent), and greater idleness

FIGURE 8. PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN AGED 20 TO 24 IDLE BY MARITAL STATUS AND PARENTHOOD



(21 percent versus 8 percent). Thus, many of those who fall into the “idle” category are parents, particularly women, who are likely devoting time to caring for young children.

Comparing nonmetro men and women without children to nonmetro parents underscores how family status contributes to work and education outcomes (see Figures 8 and 9). Figure 8 describes how few mothers, regardless of marital status, are in school (6 percent), but more single mothers are in the labor force than married/cohabiting mothers. Fully 60 percent of single mothers were working, compared to 52 percent of married/cohabiting mothers (Figure 8). More single mothers are also combining work and schooling compared to married/cohabiting mothers (13 compared to 7 percent) and a smaller share are also idle (21 percent compared to 36 percent). These patterns of less work and school engagement among mothers in marital and cohabiting unions (compared to single mothers) is consistent with prior studies (Abroms and Goldscheider 2002) and suggests that it is a function of greater economic support from a partner that allows for more time devoted to caring for children.

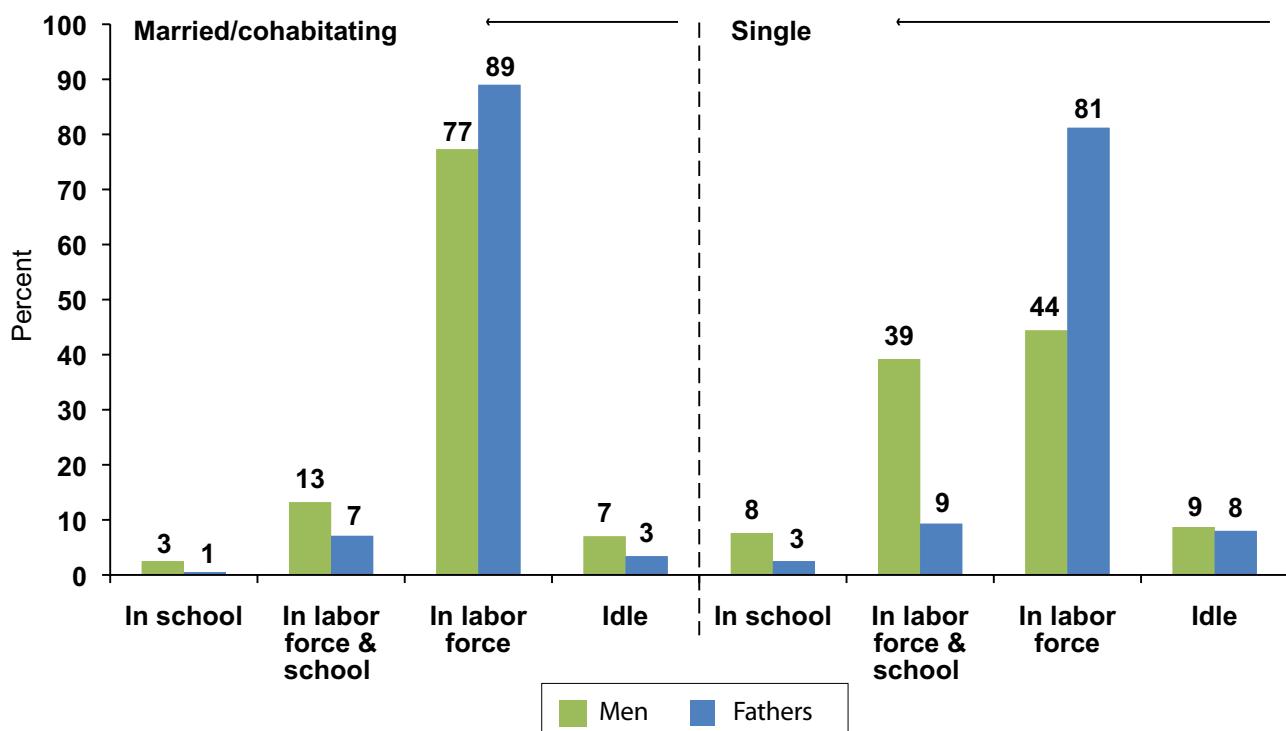
Children are not the only factor limiting women’s work and school engagement—marital status is also important. A higher percentage of single women without children are engaged in schooling—9 percent are exclusively in school and 48 percent

combine school and work—than their attached counterparts. Smaller shares of nonmetro single women are also idle compared to married/cohabiting women.

Figure 9 describes how the majority of all men are exclusively in the labor force, regardless of parenthood or marital status. A high percentage of single men are also combining school and work (39 percent) relative to single fathers (9 percent). The main difference between men and women in these figures is that parenthood makes much less difference in men’s labor force attachment (see Figure 9). In addition, compared with women and mothers, a smaller share of men and fathers are in school (with the exception of single men), combine school and work, or are idle.

These findings suggest at least two paths to adulthood for nonmetro emerging adults: one focused solely on school or combining work and school, and another centered on work and family. Early childbearing combined with less education often thwarts plans for future educational attainment (Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck, and Park 2005). Therefore, young mothers who work in presumably low-skilled jobs are entering adulthood on a trajectory that makes future educational attainment and career advancement difficult. Early parenthood, particularly for women, is a different route to idleness, but one that is problematic nonetheless.

FIGURE 9. PERCENTAGE OF MEN AGED 20 TO 24 IDLE BY MARITAL STATUS AND PARENTHOOD



# Youth Aspirations and Future Goals

It is widely recognized that the transition to adulthood in recent decades has been shaped by changing social and economic conditions that now require more from young adults. We have just described how individual characteristics contribute to inequalities in successful transitions to adulthood. We now turn to how adolescent expectations for future school and work engagement are realized in early adulthood. The combination of aspirations with social and economic structures shape key decisions in the transition to adulthood (Garasky 2002).

Table 4 shows the education and work expectations of youth aged 15 to 19 in 2000 by residence. These data are drawn from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 (NLSY97), which asked youth about their future expectations for school, work, and combining school and work.

Nonmetro youth have lower expectations for future schooling than other youth. Nearly one-half (47 percent) of nonmetro youth reported little chance that they would be enrolled in regular school in five years. Overall, 39 percent of youth gave this response. Only 28 percent of nonmetro youth had high expectations for being in school five years later, compared with 32 to 36 percent of youth from other areas (see Table 4).

The prospect of combining work and school, which, as shown in Figure 2, has become increasingly common, is also evident here. About two-thirds of all youth expect to combine work and school within the next five years. Very few youth expect to be idle. Upwards of 90 percent of all youth have high expectations that if not in school they will be in the labor force. This is consistent with prior studies that find nearly universal-

TABLE 4. CONTINUED

Expectations in 5 Years		25-49 Percent Chance			
		All (%)	Nonmetro (%)	Suburban (%)	Central city (%)
What is the percent chance you will be in regular school?*		8	7	8	8
If you are in school, what is the percent chance you will also be working 20 or more hours per week?		4	4	4	3
If you are not in school, what is the percent chance you will be working 20 or more hours per week?		1	1	1	1
Expectations in 5 Years		50-74 Percent Chance			
		All (%)	Nonmetro (%)	Suburban (%)	Central city (%)
What is the percent chance you will be in regular school?*		21	18	22	20
If you are in school, what is the percent chance you will also be working 20 or more hours per week?		19	17	20	19
If you are not in school, what is the percent chance you will be working 20 or more hours per week?		4	4	3	5
Expectations in 5 Years		75-100 Percent Chance			
		All (%)	Nonmetro (%)	Suburban (%)	Central city (%)
What is the percent chance you will be in regular school?*		33	28	36	32
If you are in school, what is the percent chance you will also be working 20 or more hours per week?		67	68	65	68
If you are not in school, what is the percent chance you will be working 20 or more hours per week?		93	93	94	91
Expectations in 5 Years					
		All (%)	Nonmetro (%)	Suburban (%)	Central city (%)
Idle: Expect to be neither working nor in school.**		3	3	3	4

TABLE 4. EDUCATION AND WORK EXPECTATIONS IN 2000  
(YOUTH AGED 15 TO 19)

Expectations in 5 Years		0-24 Percent Chance			
		All (%)	Nonmetro (%)	Suburban (%)	Central city (%)
What is the percent chance you will be in regular school?*		39	47	35	40
If you are in school, what is the percent chance you will also be working 20 or more hours per week?		10	10	10	10
If you are not in school, what is the percent chance you will be working 20 or more hours per week?		2	2	2	3

Note: Sample includes 6,900 of the wave 4 NLSY97 respondents who were in rounds 4 and 9 and who were 20 to 25 years old in round 9 (2005).

All percentages reported from the NLSY97 data are weighted using the custom W4-W9 panel weight. All numbers reported are unweighted.

The sample sizes for the NLSY97 in 2000 are: nonmetro=1,254; suburban metro=3,364; central city metro=2,195; not identified areas=87.

The NLSY97 2005 sample sizes are: nonmetro=314; suburban metro=3,513; central city metro=2,978; not identified areas=95.

\* Regular school includes degree-granting institutions and excludes technical or trade schools.

\*\* Respondents who expected a less than 50 percent chance of either working or being in school are coded as idle.

ly high expectations for future labor force participation. Their actual work outcomes, therefore, are likely less related to earlier expectations but rather to other factors, such as education, labor market opportunities, or early childbearing (Osgood et al. 2005).

Are nonmetro young adults more or less likely than their metropolitan counterparts to achieve their expectations? What role does migration play? To answer these questions, we follow the youth from the NLSY97 in 2000 and examine their education and work outcomes five years later, when they are 20 to 25 years old. One complication in this approach is that many youth migrated between 2000 and 2005, which makes measuring residential differences in education and work outcomes over time more difficult.

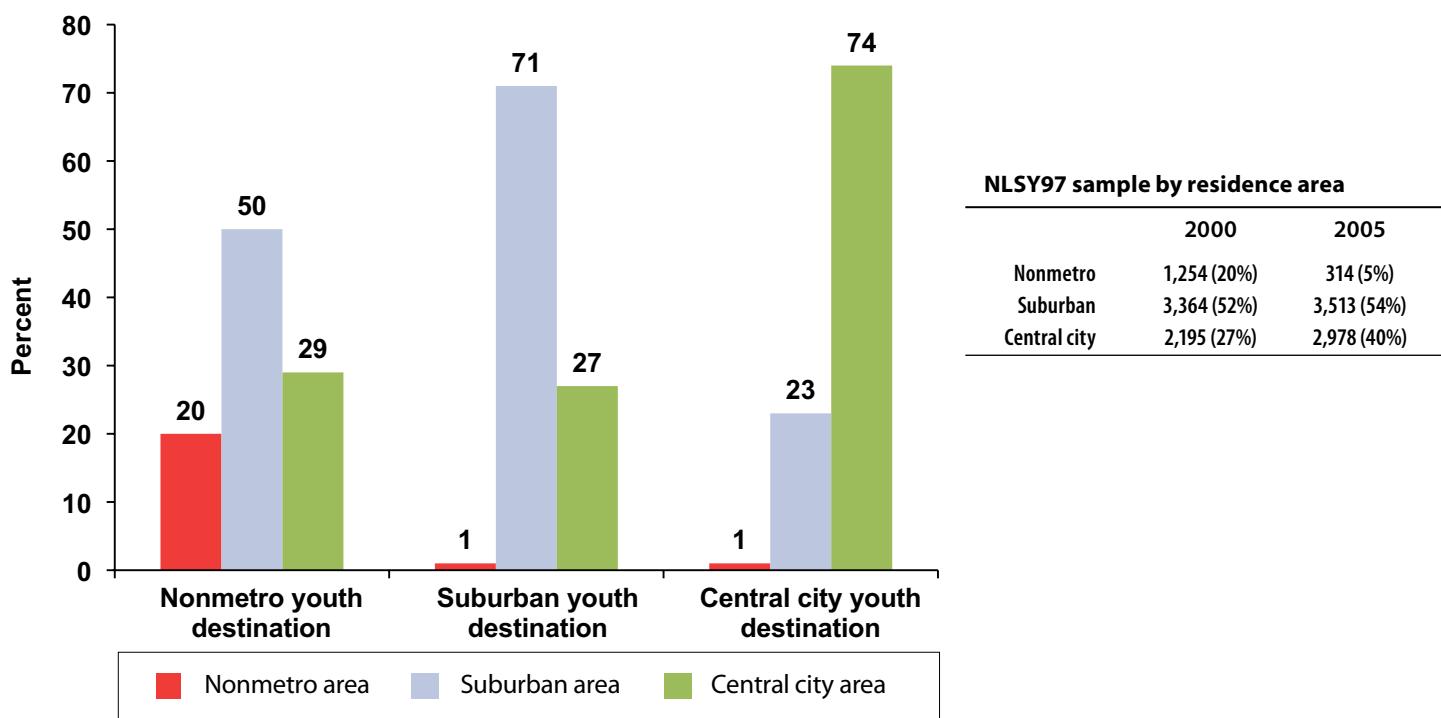
Figure 10 illustrates this mobility by presenting the percentage of youth who stayed in the same type of residence area (stayers) and those who moved to a different type of residence area (leavers) between 2000 and 2005, by residence area of origin in 2000. Most nonmetro young adults move away, while the majority of others stay in central city and suburban areas.

Only one in five youth who were living in a nonmetro area in 2000 were still in a nonmetro area in 2005. The rest migrated to either a suburban area (50 percent) or central city metro area (29 percent). In contrast, about three-fourths of youth in suburban and central city metro areas were still in those areas in 2005. Clearly, migration of young adults is unique to nonmetro areas.

These moves result in an older nonmetro population. Nonmetro young adults account for only 5 percent of the NLSY sample in 2005, down from 20 percent in 2000. Central city young adults account for 40 percent of the sample in 2005, up from 27 percent in 2000. The suburban sample accounts for approximately the same percentage of the sample in both years (see sidebar in Figure 10).

In Table 5, we present education and work outcomes separately for stayers and leavers overall and within metro and nonmetro areas, and reach three main conclusions. First, leavers in general have more education than stayers. Stayers in nonmetro areas in particular have low levels of education, even compared with stayers in other areas. Only 7 percent

FIGURE 10. YOUTH MIGRATION PATTERNS FROM 2000 TO 2005, NLSY97



*Note:* Percent figures reported are weighted using the W4-W9 NLSY97 panel weight; the numbers reported are unweighted. Percents are rounded and may not add to 100 percent.

of nonmetro stayers have completed a bachelor's degree or higher, while 16 percent have not graduated high school. Thus, for many nonmetro youth, their low expectations of being in school in five years are realized, although less so for those who move away. Out-migration appears to sort nonmetro youth with higher educational goals and perhaps the means to achieve these goals from those with other life goals. Across all groups, suburban leavers have the highest educational attainment. One-fourth have a bachelor's degree or higher five years later, and only 7 percent are high school dropouts.

A second conclusion from the analysis is that young adults who stay in nonmetro areas have a distinct pattern of combining school and work that focuses their efforts in the labor force and not on furthering their education. For example, 78 percent of nonmetro stayers are exclusively engaged in the labor force, they work the highest average hours per week (41 hours), and only 10 percent combine school and work. In contrast, nonmetro leavers share a more typical pattern with other young adults. Most are also exclusively engaged in the labor force (62 percent), but more than one-fifth combine school and

work (23 percent). Low school enrollment among nonmetro stayers drives this notable difference with nonmetro leavers. Although the reasons for less frequently pursuing higher education among the nonmetro stayers are not definitive, one reason might be the fewer educational opportunities in nonmetro areas. Another may be that nonmetro youth with higher educational aspirations move away to realize their goals.

A third key finding is that idleness in 2005 was much higher than all youth expected it would be in 2000. This is particularly the case for nonmetro and central city youth. The rates of idleness in 2005 among these groups are three to four times higher than was expected in 2000. Nonmetro leavers and central city leavers had the highest levels of idleness in 2005—12 percent for both. Overall, suburban stayers and leavers are quite similar in their rates of school, work, and idleness. Central city leavers are less likely to combine school and work (15 percent) than stayers (23 percent), and a higher share of central city leavers exclusively works (70 percent) than central city stayers (64 percent).

TABLE 5. EDUCATION AND WORK OUTCOMES IN 2005 BY RESIDENCE: STAYERS AND LEAVERS (YOUTH AGED 20 TO 25)

	All stayers	All leavers	Nonmetro stayers*	Nonmetro leavers	Suburban stayers**	Suburban leavers	Central city stayers***	Central city leavers
<b>Highest Degree Received by 2005</b>	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Less than high school	11	10	16	10	9	7	14	12
High school	70	67	70	70	70	62	70	70
Associate's	5	5	7	6	6	5	4	3
Bachelor's or higher	14	18	8	13	15	25	13	14
<b>Work Activity in 2005</b>	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Did not work in 2005	11	12	12	14	10	10	13	14
Average hours worked per week, among those who ever worked in 2005	37 hrs.	37 hrs.	41 hrs.	38 hrs.	37 hrs.	37 hrs.	36 hrs.	37 hrs.
<b>Idleness and Engagement in 2005</b>	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Idle	8	10	10	12	8	7	9	12
School only	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	3
Work only	64	64	78	62	63	63	64	70
School and work	24	23	10	23	26	27	23	15

*Note: A stayer is someone who stayed in his or her county type between 2000 and 2005. A leaver is someone who moved from his or her county type between 2000 and 2005.*

\* In nonmetro areas there were a total of 1,254 respondents: 252 stayers and 1,002 leavers.

\*\* In metro suburban areas there were a total of 3,364 respondents: 2,401 stayers and 963 leavers.

\*\*\* In metro central city areas there were a total of 2,195 respondents: 1,685 stayers and 510 leavers.

# Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Rural youth appear to face several disadvantages on the road to adulthood. The findings are consistent with the increasingly complex and lengthy transition to adulthood, as youth seek more educational credentials to position themselves in a more competitive labor market. The opportunities for those who fail to complete high school are limited, placing these youth at greatest risk for idleness, low-paying jobs, and economic uncertainty.

The critical role of migration during early adulthood among rural populations is consistent with a long line of research on out-migration from rural areas. These findings suggest that the future of rural America is threatened by the loss of youth as they seek educations and careers beyond rural areas. Little is known about whether these youth would prefer to return to rural communities when they complete their education or as they form families.

## Similar Trends, Lower Educational Engagement

In general, rural young adults have experienced the same overall trends as other young adults in recent decades. These include a growing demand for education and with that an extended path, more often combining schooling with work. The extended path to adulthood also includes periods of idleness.

A key difference between nonmetro and metro emerging adults, however, is that a smaller share of nonmetro young people are pursuing higher education. The results from the NLSY97 panel data help explain these differences. A disproportionate share of those who lived in nonmetro areas during adolescence and are engaged in schooling as emerging adults move away from nonmetro areas during the emerging adulthood period. The population that remains in nonmetro areas is less engaged in schooling, more engaged in work, and has lower educational attainment.

A possible reason for this residential gap in education is that some youth and families view the costs of a degree as too high compared with the immediate gains of employment. The current economic crisis may make college unaffordable for even middle-class families, or they may find it difficult to qualify for student loans, thus raising the economic barriers to higher education. Studies show that these factors reduce college enrollment, especially for youth from low-income

families (Fitzpatrick and Turner 2007). This results in youth delaying a college education; taking on large amounts of student loans; beginning their postsecondary education in more affordable, local community colleges and never transferring to four-year institutions; and, for nearly half who begin college, never completing their degree (Draut 2005). The effect of college loan debt is a complicated issue. Some point out that the impact of a college education on lifetime earnings is well worth the costs, even with rising tuition costs (Barrow and Rouse 2005). Others, however, point out that the psychological stress associated with tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt that needs to be repaid during the dense early adult years compounds existing economic stress associated with housing and family formation and is a common burden facing today's emerging adults that was not felt by earlier generations (Draut 2005). Policies aimed at increasing funding opportunities for postsecondary education for rural youth should help some afford college who otherwise could not attend.

Finally, rural youth are more likely than other youth to be required to move out of their home community to attend college (Garasky 2002). These circumstances result in greater potential for conflict about education and migration decisions (Elder, King, and Conger 1996; Hektner 1995) and result in larger barriers to pursuing higher education. Rural communities often struggle with this issue because they do not want to lose their youth. Even though out-migration is problematic for rural communities, it may be an essential component of a successful transition for many rural youth, and one that intersects with educational and career goals.

## Inequalities in the Transition to Adulthood

Less education, racial or ethnic minority status, and early family formation contribute to different paths and outcomes in the transition to adulthood. Low educational attainment and early childbearing is a particularly problematic combination that limits future life options in education, work, and earnings (Furstenberg et al. 1999). These inequalities are not confined to rural areas and require a comprehensive policy response. Educational policies that take a long-term perspective and recognize the enormous problems associated with dropping out of high school should encourage youth to at least finish high school. The paths of emerging adults who drop out of high

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school or become parents too soon place them at a significant long-term disadvantage.

### **Expectations and Future Outcomes**

As we have shown, rural youth have lower educational expectations than other youth. These lower expectations play out in fewer youth pursuing higher education, fewer combining school and work, and a stronger attachment to the labor force in early adulthood. Working early in one's twenties is not in itself problematic. Indeed, it likely translates into stronger lifetime attachment to the labor force. The problem, however, is that while many emerging adults combine school and work to further their educational attainment, fewer rural young people are pursuing a college education, which limits their future opportunities for advancement in the labor force.

### **Migration**

We also identified a unique role of migration for nonmetro emerging adults. A consistent story about rural America is the youth exodus, particularly of those with higher educational ambitions. This leaves behind a population with less formal education (Johnson 2003). This report finds that the high rate of out-migration among emerging adults is a problem that is ongoing and unique to nonmetro communities. Emerging adults who remain in rural areas are less engaged in schooling, more engaged in work, and have less education. The evidence suggests that youth will continue to depart in the future. Most rural areas do not have nearby four-year colleges, and the majority of rural youth now aspire to a college education (Demi, McLaughlin, and Snyder 2009). These youth must leave their rural homes to achieve their educational goals. Leaving may also be essential if youth are to attain their chosen careers, because rural communities often lack labor markets able to fulfill the occupational aspirations of some rural youth. Thus, out-migration benefits individual youth by allowing them to pursue educational and occupational opportunities that are either limited or not available in rural communities. As a result, it appears that moving not only out of one's childhood home but moving to an urban area has become a unique part of the early adult developmental process for rural youth.

# What Is a Community to Do?

Communities, schools, and adults in rural areas have three major tasks as they respond to the lengthening transition to adulthood, rising educational aspirations of rural youth, inequality in the opportunities available to them, and the resulting departure of youth to other areas. First, positive development for all youth in the community is critical. This includes working with youth to identify suitable education and career goals. Finding ways to ensure that youth who want to go to college can do so is important. Communities could consider college loan or grant programs where youth are required to return to their community for a set number of years if they are awarded a community-funded loan or grant. Communities could focus these loans or grants on occupations that are needed in the community. Communities could hold fund-raisers or solicit funds from those who have left the community and been successful in their chosen careers.

Regardless of final career goals, completing high school is essential. This basic level of education is a first and critical step in successfully navigating a society that assumes everyone is literate, has access to information on the Internet, and is able to make good decisions about finances, jobs, family formation, and raising children. Schools and all members of a community bear responsibility for helping youth who are struggling in school to stay in school. This may require a combined and coordinated effort of family services, school personnel, and friends or relatives of the at-risk youth.

To stem the outflow of youth, rural communities must consider innovative ways to improve job opportunities in the community and surrounding areas. This can include initiatives to support entrepreneurs, to aid existing businesses in expanding their markets, to build the infrastructure essential for accessing regional and global markets, and to encourage people to buy local, while building a high quality of life. These initiatives suggest that youth can be potential entrepreneurs or could be mentored by entrepreneurs in the community. Needs assessments of services and products that are unavailable locally can identify entrepreneurship opportunities. Training programs can focus on the workforce needs of local businesses and industry, as could college loan or grant programs. Finally, communities should make youth aware of jobs within a reasonable commuting distance, not just those in the immediate area of the community.

This study looks at emerging adults aged 20 to 25. It is likely that many left their rural community to attend school, to find a job that paid better, or to experience a different lifestyle. Little is known about what happens to these youth after they leave rural areas. How many plan or would prefer to return to a rural community after they have completed their education or have decided urban living is not for them? Those who have strong family ties and who felt welcome and supported in their community may wish to return at some time in the future. Rural communities that work to build a sustainable local economy, affordable housing, and a community with a high quality of life offer young adults with families who grew up in rural areas a lifestyle they may desire.

The difficulty for the community is how to provide information about local opportunities and lifestyle to rural youth who moved away, or to young adults raised in suburban or central city areas seeking a small town or rural lifestyle as an adult. Possibilities might include community or regional websites that describe available housing, employment, and recreational opportunities. A more proactive approach would involve maintaining databases of youth who have left so they can be contacted if positions appropriate to their education or occupation become available locally. Ultimately, community leaders, school personnel, and residents in rural communities must come together to build a vision that leads to a strong, sustainable community that makes youth want to stay and makes it possible for them to return if they do leave.

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